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ORGAN PLAYING

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ORGAN PLAYING

ONE of the disabilities attaching to the post of church organist is the fact that the holder has, in the nature of things, few opportunities of hearing services other than those at which he himself officiates. The following paragraphs have been penned in the hope that they may be useful to amateurs and others who have to preside at small or medium-sized instruments, but who have not had the advantage of first-class tuition, or the chance of often hearing a really well-played service. Much of what follows may well seem obvious or even trite to the experienced professional organist, but it is often the case that what seems clearest to the expert, is the most readily overlooked by the beginner.

No praise can be too high for the self-denying efforts of many church organists in remote or poor parishes, who undertake the work with slender qualifications, and even more slender rewards, simply because no others can be found to do it. It is obvious, however, that before even a good organ can sound acceptable to a cultivated ear, the player must have (a) enough knowledge to be able to read simple music at least accurately, and (b) enough keyboard technique to make decent fingering and some phrasing on the manuals a matter of habit. If at all possible, the player should have had some previous experience at the piano; otherwise elementary points of technique and notation will be constantly cropping up and hindering the student from giving his undivided attention to the special difficulties which organ playing presents to the beginner. An occasional consultation lesson with a really good teacher will always be worth while, if regular tuition is not possible; and the keen student will make a point of reading some of

the excellent books available which deal with organ playing and accompaniment.

Assuming therefore, the necessary minimum of ability on the part of the player, we may consider church organ playing under four heads as follows:

- (a) The organ accompaniment of hymns.
- (b) The organ accompaniment of psalms and chanting.
- (c) The organ accompaniment of services and anthems.
- (d) Voluntaries and solo playing.

THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF HYMNS

Hymns belong essentially to the people's part in the musical service. This does not imply, however, that all hymns are suitable for congregational singing. The wise choice of hymns is a matter outside the scope of this paper, and what follows assumes that the hymns chosen are of the broad non-introspective type which is best suited to congregational singing. Here are some points which the organist will be wise to keep in mind.

1. The playing over of the tune has two purposes, the setting of the pitch, and the speed at which it is to be sung. To these we may perhaps add a third, viz. giving the people time to find the place. The vast majority of tunes should be played over without pedals on a quiet, but not a fancy, combination of stops, usually on the swell or choir organs; the great and pedal being already prepared for the start of the first verse. Occasionally the soloing of the melody on a broad-toned diapason or reed *in the tenor register*, is effective in the case of robust tunes such as 'S. Ann' and 'Nun Danket', with accompaniment on another manual

and pedal. This, however, should never be tried unless it can be well done. In either case it is essential that the pace set in the playing over shall be firmly adhered to in the hymn itself. The precise rate adopted is a matter for careful thought. No hard and fast rules can be laid down—artistic discrimination, combined with a liberal dose of common sense, is what is wanted.

2. The great organ diapasons, 8-ft. and 4-ft., will best help to prevent dragging and loss of pitch, the swell organ, however loud, being of less use for this purpose. This does not mean that an occasional line or so cannot be played away from the great organ, but even in a quiet hymn it will be well to get things going with a clear diapason accompaniment for, at any rate, the first verse. This will apply, as a rule, even when well-meaning editors have marked the first verse *p* or even *pp*! The organist must endeavour to keep the singing live and rhythmical, and remember to re-strike all repeated notes in the treble part, especially those occurring on accented beats.

3. The 16-ft. tone of the pedal will be required as a rule, but players who have only a 16-ft. bourdon to represent 'full pedal organ' should try and accustom their singers to carry on without it for a time. Nothing gets more monotonous than the unceasing, and often indefinite tone of a pedal bourdon. When it is in use, it should always be coupled to the manual in order to secure clearness and balance.

4. Some players are inclined to overlook the fact that the notes as set out in a hymn-book represent the voice-parts only. If these, and only these, are played continuously, the accompaniment is apt to sound weak and insufficiently supporting for congregational singing. Some rearrangement of the harmony is not only legitimate, but necessary

at times, and in *f* bass passages a weak-toned bourdon, if it is the only pedal stop, will be more effective if sometimes—not always—played in the lower octave. To do this rearranging well, however, calls for experience and some knowledge of harmony; and it may be said with emphasis that a clean and correct rendering of the notes as they stand is much better than indiscriminate and clumsy filling in.

5. The start of hymns is often ragged. The first chord should be firmly sounded—without any preliminary treble or pedal note—and sustained momentarily until the voices have 'coupled on'. This need not, and should not, take long. Then the pace set in the playing over should be (as stated earlier) carefully adhered to. In tunes consisting almost wholly of minims, and in similar cases, a slight pause at the end of the second and fourth lines (and sometimes elsewhere as well) is not only necessary but artistic. *Amens*, when sung, should be taken at the same pace as the hymns they follow, and not dragged out as is so often the case. A very slight holding on of a soft pedal 16-ft. *only* at the end is more effective, as a rule, than the abrupt cessation of all sound which is intended and effective enough at the end of a brilliant organ solo.

6. The words to be sung and local conditions, i.e. the efficiency of the choir, the size of the congregation, and even the state of the weather, will affect to some extent such matters as pace, power, and the choice of stops. Thus, the organist who plays Dyke's tune 'Nicaea' at the metronome speed of forty-two to the minim and with frequent pauses (as directed in a well-known hymnal) on a dull morning with a sparse congregation and choir, and a temperature unpleasantly near to freezing-point, will be asking for trouble both musical and verbal! Avoid too

much use of the full swell and of the swell pedal. Literal word painting should be avoided as it almost always sounds more amusing than impressive; on the other hand the general sentiment of the words should be brought out as much as possible.

Nothing that can be said will compensate for the absence of artistic feeling and 'gumption' on the part of the organist, who will certainly sooner or later find himself 'up against' unexpected and difficult conditions. The comfort of clergy and congregation and the spirit of worship in the service will depend in no small measure on the way he deals with them.

THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF CHANTING

All that was said as to the playing over and starting of hymns applies equally to chants; but after this, things are not the same. Much depends on the efficiency or otherwise of the choir. If the choir are not up to their work the organist will have to sacrifice artistic accompaniment, and devote all his energies to steering things through somehow. If he is a good musician he is to be pitied, for he will find this a sore trial. Assuming, however, that the singers are reasonably self-reliant, the organ accompaniment of the psalms is best regarded as a background and embellishment of the text, rather than a continuous support for the voices. The following points are often overlooked:

1. The pedal 16-ft. should only rarely be in use. The 'glorias' and other verses sung by full choir will no doubt call for it; but otherwise an average of eight out of every ten verses without pedals is by no means too many.

2. Remember that a single note even, played on a clear toned flute, *above the voices*, will do as much as, or even

more to maintain the pitch than a noisy accompaniment in unison with them.

3. Frequent use should be made of quiet swell stops with the box shut, or nearly shut, and played an octave above the voices (of course without pedals). The effect is usually excellent and helpful to the voices.

4. If the choir is reasonably well balanced, an occasional verse with two parts only on the organ in contrasted tone, such as reed (fairly strong) and flute, produces a good effect and one not often heard. Sometimes the contrast may be one of pitch only, one part being above the voices, and the other below, the voices filling in the middle. In this case the stop used should be a fairly quiet one and not too individual in tone.

5. Avoid playing too loud, or using swell reeds continuously. The effect soon gets tiring and is bad for the voices. 'Too much organ' is a complaint often justified, even in high places.

6. If plainsong is used, or anglican chants sung in unison, it is unwise to trust to improvised harmonies unless you are a really good hand at it. Use a printed selection of harmonies or write out your own if you are sure they are artistic.

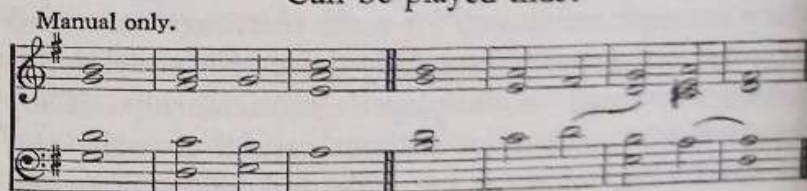
7. The effect of certain stops as heard at the keyboard and away from it is often quite different. It is necessary to make sure that your registration sounds well 'down the church' as well as at the console.

8. The possibilities of 16-ft. manual stops played an octave higher, and of 4-ft. played an octave lower, are often overlooked, also of single stops heard quite alone. Good diapasons and reeds (especially the latter) sound much 'fresher' when heard by themselves.

9. Lastly, be thoroughly acquainted with the pointing used. Few things are more irritating than constantly to hear the singers going before and the minstrel following after. This difficulty is sometimes accentuated by chants which do not lie comfortably for the keyboard, although quite satisfactory for voices. In such cases rearrange the chants in a more comfortable way, and if necessary write them out and play from the manuscript copy. An illustration is appended. In this case the melody remains intact,



Can be played thus:



but if the trebles can hold their own independently of the organ, numbers of delightful and easily played arrangements are possible.

THE ACCOMPANIMENT OF SERVICES AND ANTHEMS

It should not be necessary to say much about these, since their use is infrequent where musical resources are limited, and in most cases the composer or editor has indicated the treatment. This, however, should always be subject to revision according to local circumstances. The direction 'full' or 'full organ' appears with distressing frequency in many works both ancient and modern, and should seldom, if ever, be interpreted literally. Therefore, on any but the tiniest of organs, great to principal with full swell is ample for any church choir. Directions for 'clarinet' or 'oboe with trem.' should be ignored, unless the stops concerned are of good quality, *and in tune*. A gamba or flute is usually a quite passable alternative.

The organist is usually conductor as well as accompanist, therefore he must not be erratic in his own tempi, but must adopt a rhythmic style with judicious use of non-legato touch, and thus stimulate and support the voices. He will prove his skill far more in preventing choral trouble than in dealing with it when it arises. Many accompaniments call for some rearrangement, and excerpts from oratorios (especially those of Mendelssohn) make a severe call on the player's musicianship. They should not be undertaken without careful thought and rehearsal. The subject is too wide and too complicated to deal with here.

VOLUNTARIES AND SOLO PLAYING

Perhaps the most important points to make here are (a) that any music played in connexion with a church service shall be well within the player's technical powers; that it shall have been properly prepared, and admit of reasonable justice being done to it on the instrument available, and (b) that a very definite distinction shall be

drawn between pieces suitable for recitals, and pieces suitable as voluntaries. If organ pieces are to be played before service it is of the first importance that they shall be in keeping with the mood of worship, and the service which is to follow them. Thus, the 'tuney' piece played on a solo reed with tremulant and a light accompaniment on another manual should never be used, and the same may be said of the popular type of march, often little more than a polka, as a concluding voluntary. Many pieces of this type are undeniably well written, and are by composers of eminence, but their place is (occasionally) in a recital programme, and not before or after a church service. It is not always realized how rich is the store of good organ music, to say nothing of suitable transcriptions, suitable for various times and occasions; and there is little excuse for the player who uses poor or unsuitable music on the ground that there is nothing better available. The preludes on chorales and hymn-tunes by Bach, Karg-Elert, Parry, and many other composers are generally suitable. The chorale prelude, however, has become fashionable, and nowadays tends to be overdone; but there are many slow movements from sonatas, and other separate pieces of all degrees of difficulty, which are quite good and suitable. Voluntaries should, if possible, be in keeping with the church seasons, and there are numerous collections of pieces, especially by French composers, written with this purpose in view. *The Liturgical Organist* by Godfrey Sceaats ('Musical Opinion' office, London) contains lists of them, and should be read by every organist who is anxious that this branch of his work should be fitting and suitable to its place and purpose. All pieces should be judged on their merits, and not by composers' names. Thus the 'Fugue alla gigue', the D major, and one or two other Bach works should be reserved for recitals only.

Extemporizing is occasionally necessary,¹ but is far too often resorted to. An extemporization should never take the place of a good concluding voluntary, and indeed is best used only when a period of a minute or less has to be filled up. Even then it is essential that the player should have a sense of what is fitting, and, as in all his work, be imbued with the spirit of reverence and worship. Really good extempore players are rare, and most of them are foremost in condemning the indiscriminate use of extemporization in church.

¹ *The Liturgical Organist*, referred to above, has a useful chapter on extemporization.